

Consumer Goods

(Shopping on the Web for Art Teacher Barbie®)

Since the 1950s advertisers have targeted teenagers, and over the past few decades this has extended downwards towards children. Children possess little economic power, but considerable “pester power” by which they influence purchasing decisions made by other family members. Reduced family size, uneven but generally higher levels of disposable income, and the sanctification of childhood now present children with unprecedented purchasing power. In the United States, children are estimated to be responsible for about \$10 billion in purchases while they influence about a further \$130 billion worth of purchases (Buckingham, 2000, p. 147). No wonder then that producers have adopted a “child-centered” approach to product promotion.

In consuming, we never simply reproduce ourselves physically; we also reproduce specific, meaningful ways of life. All products are simultaneously commodities and reference points for living. In a capitalist society, consumerism permeates the very fabric of everyday existence. Whether we approve or not, it is the basis of our economy and one of the major pillars of our culture.

Activities

- Students can devise their own products for particular markets as well as devise a marketing campaign for their products. They might include advertisements with slogans and text, bumper stickers, websites, or even a television commercial. If they were to devise a shopping mall on the Web, they would begin to understand how the Web entices the act of purchasing.
- Have students comb through magazines looking for their favorite products. Students can create a kind of self-portrait consisting of their favorite products, so that they see how their tastes are socially constructed.
- Students can also compare advertising today with advertising from the 19th century. Focus especially on how images are now much more important than in earlier periods.
- Have students rank advertisements for the impact or significance of words versus pictures on a scale of 1 to 10.
- Students could take an advertisement and alter it, or appropriate it, so as to turn its message on its head or to make an ironic comment upon it. This could be done with the addition of words or by juxtaposing the advertisement with other images.

Guiding Questions

- Are consumers generally rational or irrational, in charge of themselves or manipulated, autonomous or over concerned with the opinion of others, active or passive, creative or conformist? Is there a difference between how we see ourselves as consumers and how we see others?
- Is consumerism gendered? For example, how legitimate is the common perception that males are rational but females are irrational consumers?
- In a market characterized by both mass and niche marketing, is consumption a matter of keeping up with the Joneses, or keeping different from the Joneses?
- In noting both the way consumerism delineates between social groups and the depletion of resources, does consumerism divide more than it provides?
- How do people feel who cannot pay the membership fee for living in a consumer culture—that is, people who do not have sufficient money to participate?
- Does living in a consumer culture lead people to being unhappy because it shows more of what they cannot have than it offers what they can have?
- When is consuming an act of love, cherishing, devouring, relishing, exhausting, cannibalizing, to be satisfied or remain unsatisfied, to feel full or empty, to be completed or alienated, excited or bored, and so on?
- Is it legitimate to treat all problems as solvable, as advertising does? In short, are there limits to consumer culture, and if so, what are they? What doesn't consumer culture satisfy?